

Love Heals

By

Dinah McLeod

©2014 by Blushing Books® and Dinah McLeod

All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Blushing Books®,
a subsidiary of

ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

The trademark Blushing Books®
is registered in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

McLeod, Dinah
Love Heals

eBook ISBN: 978-1-62750-499-7
Cover Design by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book is intended for *adults only*. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual spanking activity or the spanking of minors.

Table of contents:

Chapter 1	5
Chapter 2	20
Chapter 3	36
Chapter 4	48
Chapter 5	68
Chapter 6	86
Chapter 7	94
Epilogue	109
Dinah McLeod	114
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	117
Blushing Books	118

Chapter 1

"Remember the rule," Brandon whispered huskily into my ear, making me shiver as warmth traveled throughout the length of my body. "Don't come until I say you can."

"Yes, Sir." My reply was a breathy little whisper that did little to convey how close I was already. It didn't take much where my smokin'-hot boyfriend was concerned. All it took was a look, the one he got when he found me impossible and sexy all at once, and I was ready.

My promise proved harder to keep than I'd originally imagined, which was the whole point of the game. He did everything he could think of to take me to the brink of ecstasy and the promise of what would follow if I disobeyed was enough to send me tumbling over the edge.

"Don't," he warned in a low overtone as he teased and pinched my hardened nipple between his fingers.

I pressed my legs together, trying to fight my desire, or at least hold it at bay for as long as possible. He'd been delivering a steady barrage of torturous pleasure for over half an hour now and I didn't know how much more I could take. My thighs were moist with longing and squeezing my legs together only served to make me hyper-aware of my need for release.

"Close your eyes," he whispered and I obeyed without delay. The assault began anew as he traced his fingers along every contour of my naked body, leaving a trail of goose bumps as he went.

"Brandon," I gasped, another breathy murmur.

"Shh, I'm hardly even touching you." He was right, of course, but somehow that feather-light touch awakened every nerve in my body. Every inch of me was shivery and aroused, every bit of skin begging for his attention. I drew my breath in slowly, waiting to see what he would do next. My nipples were hardened to the point of pain which might have a little something to do with the nipple clamps he'd put on them earlier. My pussy was throbbing in need, but it didn't seem like he planned on sating my desire any time soon. I pressed the back of my hand to my mouth, muffling my frustrated moan.

He heard it anyway and chuckled low in his throat. "Soon, baby girl, if you're good. You *do* want to be good, don't you?"

God, I'd never wanted anything more in my life. I arched my back, pushing my breasts out toward him, not bothering to try to hide my moan this time. I was lying on his bed, flat on my back, my wrists tied to the bedposts for no other reason than because seeing them bound excited him. When he took my nipple into his mouth, the heat of his lips against my tender skin made my breath hitch in excitement and I couldn't bite back the moan of ecstasy that rose to my lips.

"Not yet," he scolded before he went back to alternating between suckling and biting down on my nipple.

I laid flat again with a whimper, desperately wishing I could talk him into fucking me. I would try if I thought I had half a chance of being successful, but I'd begged before and I was determined not to do it again. I was a CEO of my own company, for God's sake! I was used to being begged, not the other way around!

He switched nipples, making my groans deepen with urgency. When his fingers traced the outside of my pussy I thought I'd come on the spot. "Not yet," he murmured wickedly. When he slid a finger in, testing my wetness, I nearly came undone. Every single cell in my body was begging for release, an end to this torture that would only stop one of two ways: either with him fucking me until we were both sweaty and exhausted and incapable of speech, or until my body betrayed me and disobeyed him. To do so would land me right over his knee, which I suspected was what he'd been hoping for. Well, I would be damned if I gave him what he wanted—or at least I'd die trying, which was starting to look more likely.

The second finger slid in next to the first and Brandon strummed me expertly, making my sex clench and hum with anticipation. I could feel my climax building, my body going taut to fight it. He let go of my nipple abruptly and it tingled with the loss of his touch. He bent down and blew a stream of warm air on my wet pussy lips, which was all it took for me to surrender to the pleasure that had been striving to overtake me.

I caught sight of the satisfied grin moving across Brandon's face right before I closed my eyes and shuddered against his hand. He was a gentleman, he didn't believe in leaving things unfinished and he let his fingers dance wildly, mercifully inside me until my orgasm reached its peak. He walked around the bed to untie my hands and climbed back in bed beside me, pulling me to him while I trembled with another orgasm.

I snuggled close, curling against his big, strong chest. "I think you like it when I lose."

"You know something?" he asked, trailing a finger down my cheek. "I think you like it,

too."

"You certainly seem pleased with yourself," I huffed, hiding a smile.

"Course I am, baby. I'll be even more pleased when I've got that glorious ass of yours over my knee and paddle in hand."

I pulled back to look at him, my eyes wide. "You didn't say anything about a paddle!"

"Didn't I?" he asked, laughter dancing in his dark blue eyes.

"Brandon..."

"Okay, okay, no paddle. Maybe I'll bring the flogger out to play."

I relaxed and snuggled back up to him. I liked the flogger, which he knew all too well. He gave me a few minutes to lounge in the luxurious warmth of his body before patting my bottom and standing. I groaned when I felt the bed shift as he got off, but it was only for effect. I was smiling behind my hand.

In the beginning, I'd found the idea of a grown woman being spanked—especially a smart, powerful one like myself—absurd. But then, Brandon could be very persuasive with his broad shoulders and rock-hard abs. The first time I'd felt his hand collide with my bottom in a hard barrage of punishing smacks, I'd vowed it would never happen again, but as we continued to date he taught me that spankings could be as wonderfully pleasurable and relaxing as they could be painful. Thankfully, it was the former I had in store for me today. It would hurt a little, but it would also amplify the pleasure.

"Roll on your stomach and push your bottom toward me, honey." His voice was as smooth as velvet and it was enough to make me shiver in excitement. He was always so gentle with me, which I found downright sexy.

Look at that, already horny again before the first swat has even landed, I thought to myself as I obeyed.

"Mmm," he said as his large, broad hand stroked my bare cheeks. "You know, I'd bet Aphrodite herself would envy this ass."

"Are you saying the Goddess of Love had a flat butt?" I teased, muffling my laughter with the pillow. Laughter that quickly turned to an indignant screech as his hand collided with my cheek in a firm spank.

"Not at all, just that it couldn't have been nearly as perfect as yours." Another firm smack punctuated his words.

I relaxed and let myself fall into the rhythm of the spanking, often sighing after a swat. Never, ever did I think I would list *spanking* under relaxing activities, but it was right up there with hot baths and yoga—only much more fun.

"Do you like that, my naughty girl?" he asked huskily as he continued to spank my bottom. "You're starting to blush already."

He said it like it was a compliment and I giggled.

"You didn't answer my question." He tsked his tongue and the smacks got a little harder.

"Hey, no fair!" I protested, turning around. "This isn't supposed to hurt!"

He arched a dark brown eyebrow and gave me that look that turned my insides to jelly. "Is that right, little girl? And since when do you get to tell me how to spank you?"

He had a point. Damn it, I hated it when he was right, because it usually meant more pain for my poor bottom. "I don't, but—"

"You did," he countered, still frowning in a way that made my thighs quiver—whether in fear or excitement I wasn't quite sure.

A thousand retorts leapt to my lips, but in the end I lowered my lashes and went with the one that would be the most helpful. To my bottom, that was. "I'm sorry, Sir."

"We'll see. Turn around."

I obeyed, grateful for the playfulness I could hear underneath his stern tone. The next spank landed quickly, followed rapidly by another to my other cheek. Both stung and were followed by half a dozen more, delivered rapid-fire.

"I make the rules, Karen and if I choose to make your spanking hurt, you'll take it without the attitude. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir," I sniffled. It was what I'd agreed to, after all, and having him take me in hand made me as wet as it made him hard. Weird or not, it was what worked for us.

"Now, I'm getting the flogger. Put your legs together, please."

I winced. The only time he ever told me to close my legs was when he intended to spank my thighs. I'd had such high hopes for tonight and I had to ruin it with being sassy. Thankfully, from the first swat I could tell he'd switched back to playful. The spansks hurt a little, but the sting faded quickly and was replaced with a tingling that made me purr contentedly.

"Are you ready for the rest of your punishment, little girl?"

"Yes, Sir," I replied dutifully, turning to face him.

"On your knees then."

I obeyed quickly with a radiant smile on my face as I unzipped his fly and pulled out his erection. The sight of it never failed to make me horny. I took to my task with gusto, pulling the length into my mouth as far as I could without making myself gag.

Brandon's hand tangled in my hair, guiding me as he groaned his pleasure.

Hearing it spurred me on and I slid my lips up and down his cock with more enthusiasm than I'd imagined possible before meeting him. When I tasted the drop of pre-cum on the head of his cock, I slurped lustily, eager to have his seed spill into the back of my throat.

"God, Karen." He grabbed me around the waist and hauled me to my feet.

"But—"

He interrupted my pouting with a quick smack to my tingling rear. "Bed. Now."

I scampered to obey his huskily growled command, throwing myself on my back and opening my legs—not to mention my dripping pussy—to his cock. He plunged into my soaking depths with a roar that made me grab fistfuls of sheet and brace myself. Normally unendingly tender, it set my heart to racing when Brandon took me forcefully, his pumping, hurried thrusts telling me how much my body pleased him.

When he came, I let myself go and climaxed right behind him, our bodies shuddering together in mutual bliss. When he fell on me, his tight, muscled body glistened with a sheen of sweat. He kissed my temple and whispered something that sounded like *I love you* in between quick, gasping breaths.

I was too spent for words, so I grabbed his cock and moved my hand up and down his shaft to show him instead.

My ass was still tingling—in a very tantalizing, delicious sort of way—when my phone vibrated on the nightstand. "Crap," I muttered when I saw the calendar reminder flashing at me.

"What?" Brandon walked out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a plush, dark blue towel wrapped around his waist.

Even though he'd fucked me thoroughly mere minutes ago, the sight of his hard, toned body glistening with water was enough to make me ache all over again for the feel of his cock inside me. From the moment my eyes landed on his taut, perfect body, I was entranced. I couldn't resist going to him and stepping into his arms, welcoming the embrace he offered. I didn't mind

that my hair dampened as I leaned against his chest. Just inhaling the manly, sandalwood scent of his skin made up for that. Simply being near him made it more than worth it.

"What is it, Karen?"

"Nothing," I sighed, already regretting that I had to leave. These days, I lived for the weekends, for the two whole days I could spend with him uninterrupted by work. It was comical, considering that only a few short months ago my stance on it had been live to work rather than work to live. As CEO of the company I'd created, Dusty Records, I'd once had a habit of working twelve to fourteen grueling hours a day. Now, I came in late, left early and some days even slipped away for an extended lunch. There had to be some perks of being at the top, right?

"Doesn't sound like nothing," he replied, his hands reaching around to cup my ass. When he gave my right cheek a pinch, I gasped and tried to pull away, but his hands trapped me easily. "If I have to ask again, the paddle *will* come out."

I shivered at the huskily murmured threat. "I just have a meeting I'd rather not attend."

"Tsk, tsk," he scolded playfully. "Who's this woman and what have you done with the real Karen? *She'd* never miss a day of work."

"What can I say, you've corrupted me."

"In more ways than one," he said with a sexy grin that made my stomach flip.

"Skip work today," I begged, tightening my grip around his waist.

"You know I'd love to, just like you also know that I can't."

I tilted my head back, widening my brown eyes and chewing my bottom lip in a way that I knew he found irresistible. "Please?"

"Don't make me repeat myself, woman," he growled, dipping me backwards and kissing my mouth. "You'll regret it."

Thinking that a spanking would at least keep him with me another half hour, I was willing to risk it until I saw the resolution in his eyes.

He pulled me back up and released me—I could see his regret, but he let go nonetheless. "Better start getting ready, babe. Do you want me to turn the shower back on for you?"

"You should have let me share yours," I mumbled sullenly.

"You know that's against the rules." He stroked my hair and leaned over to kiss my head lightly before he turned and headed back for the bathroom.

There was nothing I could do but watch him leave, admiring his broad shoulders, tanned

back and tight, firm ass. Just looking at him got me wet again, which was why he'd made it a rule that we couldn't shower together on the weekdays. He said it was pointless, because we couldn't keep our hands off each other and never got clean. After he'd been late to work twice in the same week, he'd laid down the law. It was just one more reason I looked forward to the weekends.

With a long suffering sigh, I went into the bathroom to take a shower. Alone. I knew he was right, of course—his body was irresistible enough to make me want to call in sick every day of the week.

"Have a great day," he said, giving me one more lingering kiss.

"Whatever," I mumbled.

"Are you pouting, Karen? Do I need to remind you what happens to little girls who pout?" He asked before I could answer.

"No, Sir," I replied quickly, forcing my tone back toward civility.

"Are you sure? I'd be more than happy to remind you that spankings aren't always so much fun."

"You have to be at work, remember?"

He frowned at my sassy tone. "You're right, otherwise I'd deal with that smart mouth right now. But you know what, I think I'm going to head in and leave you to your shower. But make no mistake, we *will* be having a discussion about it this evening. And you have all day to think about it."

Worry about it, he meant. I squirmed under his stern gaze. I knew the pouting would put him on edge. He hated it when I tried to make him feel guilty and I never seemed to know how to stop myself. "I'm sorry," I apologized meekly.

"We'll see. I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Have a good day and be a good girl for me, okay?"

He said "be good" but what he actually meant was "be nice" and I quickly turned away so he couldn't call me out on rolling my eyes and add it to my growing list of sins. Besides which, I was always nice. If not, at least I always got the job done and that was close enough, right? Yeah, they were practically the same thing.

"Karen?" There was an undercurrent of warning in his voice that prodded me to turn and face him.

"Yes, Sir," I agreed, trying hard to keep the annoyance out of my voice. I held the opinion that my business was my business, but my boyfriend didn't happen to share that view.

It was clear that he'd caught it despite my attempt to hide it, but he let it go with another stern look. "I'll see you back here later?"

"Of course."

He gave my bottom one more pat as a reminder before he turned to leave. I let the water run as I watched him walk away. Oh, but he was yummy. It was one of the reasons I had such a hard time going to work these days—for one thing, his scrumptious bod made me want to keep us between the sheets, but for another, there was *no* way he wasn't being ogled by other women. Hell, he was chiseled enough to be getting cat calls from other men, too and the thought of anyone looking at him made me insanely, irrationally jealous. It was just something that I was going to have to live with.

I hopped into the shower and washed my hair as quickly as I could, running a soapy loofah over my body as I rinsed my hair. I didn't take long showers; I was out in less than five minutes, dripping wet and feeling deliciously clean. As I blow dried my hair, I couldn't help but smile at the thought of getting dirty in the very best of ways when he got home. I might have made one more stab at convincing him to ditch work and stay with me, but it looked like he'd gotten dressed and left while I was in the shower. It was probably for the best; I didn't enjoy punishment spankings as much as the other and I knew as well as he did that's exactly where it was headed if I kept pushing.

When my tresses were dry, I took a moment to scrutinize my reflection. My dark brown eyes were glowing—something they'd taken to doing often since I'd met Brandon. My straight black hair fell to my shoulders and my high cheekbones were a rosy color, highlighting my complexion that was the color of light brown sugar. I'd never thought of myself as a pretty girl, until Brandon. He'd changed a lot of things—hell, he'd changed the way I saw the world. But I knew my voluptuous ass was his favorite feature by far.

A quick glance at my watch told me I'd been dawdling too long. I dropped the towel and walked into the bedroom, heading toward the closet where my navy pinstripe business suit was hanging by itself. Brandon had offered more than once to give me half the closet, or at least a drawer, but as much as I loved him, I couldn't bring myself to take him up on it. I was too independent and I'd been that way too long to think that giving up my apartment was a good idea.

Sure, it would start out as a drawer—didn't it always? But we both knew that was where he was hoping it would go.

I wanted to move cautiously, just in case. Although, in a way, it was already too late—he already had possession of my heart. The thought of things not working out made a sharp pain erupt in my chest.

"Get it together," I muttered as I zipped up my skirt. I couldn't afford to think this way, not now. I had to switch into CEO mode, which was a lot like shifting gears in a car. Before Brandon, I'd only *had* one mode—alpha bitch extraordinaire, with a can of whoop ass on the side. Boyfriends, however, liked to believe that there was a softer, feminine side lying underneath and my boyfriend in particular used a paddle to bring out that side of me. While I'd done my best to keep my biting sarcasm and impatient temper to a minimum, there were still parts of me—the soft, feminine ones, for example—that I couldn't afford for my employees to see.

One in particular sprang to mind: Mark Patterson, my Vice President of Operations. He was a very intelligent, highly capable man. Perhaps too much so, when it came right down to it. In some people, it would be considered a good thing—not so much with the man who wanted to steal your job. Not that I could blame him; in his shoes, I'd be the same way and perhaps that was part of the problem: I knew he was too much like me to be trusted.

That was why it was essential that I get to this meeting on time, whether I wanted to be there or not. Mark had called all the board members together to discuss the future of Dusty Records now that the merger I'd personally planned had fallen through. Our stocks had fallen ten points on the day that SunFilm managed to find a loophole that allowed them to prevent my company from taking over theirs, and the numbers had been sliding downhill ever since. Something had to be done.

Putting my game face on—which included a little makeup and bags under my eyes, which were practically a prerequisite for a CEO—I gave my reflection one more glance-over before hitting the door. My black Porsche was waiting in the driveway and I took a moment to stroke the hood. "Morning, baby. Mama's got a busy day ahead of her."

Yes, so I talked to my car. So what? You would too, if you'd dreamt of owning a Porsche since you were a little girl. Every time I saw the gleaming chrome, I felt a little lighter, even if it only lasted for a moment. That Porsche was the embodiment of everything I'd worked for as a Puerto Rican girl from the wrong side of the tracks; it was the culmination of everything I'd ever

dreamed of having one day, and it was *mine*, because of my hard work. My success was my own, which was why I tried so hard to hold onto a company that I was losing interest in.

It didn't help matters that things with Brandon and me had just started around the whole merger debacle. Sometimes, I couldn't help thinking that if I'd been more focused, worked longer hours instead of spending time with my boyfriend, maybe things would have turned out differently. The so-called merger had been a multi-million dollar deal that would have secured hundreds of new jobs. I was far from the only person who had been bitterly disappointed, but the only one who had the blame laid at their feet. Sometimes, I thought that CEO was just a fancy title for "fall guy".

I chided myself as I cranked the radio up to drown out the traitorous thoughts. *Stop thinking about it! This isn't helping. You need to be calm and collected when you go in there. The board members are probably going to whine and need some serious hand holding. You've got to bring your A-game.*

It was hard to let go though. It had been the biggest, boldest move of my six year career as CEO, and if I let myself think on it too long, I became overwhelmed with insecurity and self-loathing, which was precisely why I couldn't think about it right now. The self-flagellation would have to wait until later.

I peeled out of the driveway as though I had Satan himself trailing me and before I knew it, a glance at my speedometer showed that I was going 60—in a 35. Damn. I tapped the brake to slow accordingly, craning my neck for any sign of cop cars. When I'd gone a few miles without blue lights flashing behind me, I allowed myself to relax a fraction. Brandon didn't like my lead foot one bit, a point he'd made painfully clear with his belt the last time I'd brought home a speeding ticket. Thankfully, what he didn't know couldn't hurt me.

I barreled into the parking lot ten minutes early, to my immense relief. I leapt out of the car, yanking the cap off a gold tube of Red Satin and applying it to my lips hurriedly before throwing it back inside and slamming the door. I took off at a run, pressing the auto lock as I went. My high heels pounded on the pavement like a hammer on a nail as I sprinted toward the door, my blood was pumping with adrenaline that kept pushing me forward. I stopped by my office for my assistant, but Jack was nowhere to be found. I felt my stress level rise another notch, but there was nothing I could do right now. Although later I could certainly tongue-lash him to tears.

For now, I had bigger fish to fry. So let's start heating up the oil, I thought to myself as I made my way to the boardroom. When I approached the imposing double doors I took a moment to catch my breath and smooth back my hair. When I opened the door, I entered the room with my shoulders thrown back and my head held high, briefcase in hand.

From the moment I entered the room, something felt off. An inkling that I couldn't name tickled the back of my neck. I tried to push it aside as I strode into the room, but at my approach the low murmur of conversation ceased completely. Something's going on here, the devil on my shoulder hissed. Nothing I can't handle, I tried to reassure myself. Yet, as I felt every pair of eyes on me, I wondered. What the hell was going on? There shouldn't be this many people in here—there were always a few last minute stragglers, but no, every board member and assistant was present.

Including mine. I spotted Jack standing at the head of the table, blocking the person in my seat. *My seat*. Who would dare? Even before he stepped aside, I was pretty sure I already knew the answer.

The eyes on me felt like laser beams—my face responded to the attention by flushing hotly, even though I wasn't quite sure why. I had to do something. "Good morning," I called out, trying to keep my voice from shaking. I was overreacting. There was nothing wrong here. This was just a board meeting, I'd been to dozens. So what if everyone was early for once? That didn't have to foreshadow anything sinister.

But no one answered me. I became even more conscious of the eyes on me, imagining I heard the whispers start up again as I passed. The room was so silent I could hear my heart beating a steady tattoo in my chest which, as the seconds ticked by, sped up dramatically. But I forced myself to smile; you could never let them see you sweat. It wasn't good for the stock numbers.

As I moved toward the table, Jack stepped aside and I saw Mark Patterson keeping my seat warm. My pulse picked up speed, but I'd already known that he was the only one who would be so bold. What bothered me wasn't the fact that he was sitting in my chair, but the fact that he was lounging in it as though it had been handpicked with his ass in mind, that when he saw me coming he didn't make a move to stand. In fact, as I met his light green eyes, they looked distinctly satisfied in a way that made my earlier flutters of trepidation feel like mere butterflies.

I schooled my features so that the traitorous emotion wouldn't show. "Mark, how are

you?"

"Good morning, Ms. Donahue," Mark said breezily, grinning for all he was worth. "How nice of you to join us."

I should have thrown you out on your ass long ago, I thought, narrowing my eyes. "I think you got confused. Your chair is over there." I pointed. "Though it looks to be taken at present. Maybe you can stand in the back."

His grin only grew and my stomach knotted at the sight of it. For someone who was getting publically humiliated in front of the most important people in the business, he looked strangely at ease. In fact, he looked like he was enjoying himself. "Of course," he said smoothly in a voice that I distrusted immediately.

Still, when he stood, I took my seat—the bastard stepped out of range before I could push him out of the way, which I would have done with pleasure—and slammed my briefcase on the table. "I officially call this meeting to order," I announced with an air of authority.

Normally, you would hear the rustling of notepads being opened, pens being uncapped, summaries being flipped through. The room was dead silent, except for a board member who couldn't stop coughing. It looked like I had plenty of reasons to justify the nervousness fluttering in the pit of my stomach. Mark hadn't moved and was still hovering by my elbow. He looked more smug than before, if that was possible. I glanced around the room and noted that not only was no one talking, no one would meet my eyes. Even my assistant, when I looked his way, studiously avoided my gaze.

The knots in my stomach tightened as I cleared my throat. "If you'll turn to page one in your handouts, we'll get started." Still nothing, except for a few blank stares. I could feel the pulse in my neck racing. I turned to page one, trying to ignore the foreboding that was making my breath quicken and my head pound. I started reading, but when my voice sounded weak and shaky to my own ears, I fell silent.

I cut my eyes at Mark, glowering at him. I was about to ask the room at the large what the hell was going on when it hit me: the bastards had started the meeting without me! That was why it felt like I'd interrupted—I actually had. But how could the CEO be interrupting? Unless...

Calm down, I coached myself. Just keep calm and you'll be okay. The trouble was, I felt anything but.

"Karen."

I turned at the sound of the voice and saw Arthur Boyle had stood and was moving toward me. I felt a wave of relief wash over me, until I saw the stony look on his face which quickly turned relief to cold, piercing dread. Arthur had been my mentor, a father figure of sorts for the past six years and for the first time he looked distinctly unhappy to see me.

"Could I have a moment?"

I froze at the quiet urgency in his voice. "I...no, I'm going to stay right here," I said, loud enough for everyone to hear. I knew this game better than any of them—hell, as far as Dusty Records was concerned, I'd invented it—and I knew that to vacate my seat now when I was so uncertain about what was going on would be tantamount to admitting defeat.

"Ms. Donahue, I really must insist—"

My eyes darted back to Mark and the smirk he'd been sporting had blown into a Cheshire grin that made my fingers ache with the desire to scratch his smug little face to ribbons. "Someone please tell me what's going on here." Pro that I was, I kept my expression neutral even as the knots in my belly tightened into a vise that was quite capable of choking the life out of me.

"We were holding the meeting to discuss the future of Dusty Records," Mark said smoothly as he stepped forward.

I shot Arthur a helpless look, but his face had gone blank and stiff. "I arrived five minutes early, by my watch."

"The time was changed. I made several attempts to notify you, but I never heard back."

I call bullshit, I thought, glowering at him. When we got a moment alone, he was *so* fired. "How hard did you try, exactly?" I asked in a honeyed undertone meant for his ears alone.

He inclined his head to hide the onset of another smirk.

"That's what I thought." I turned back to the board members, who were all looking my way this time. "I don't know exactly what Mr. Patterson has told you, but—"

"The members of the board and I were just having a long discussion about you, Karen," he interrupted. "We were discussing whether or not you're fit to retain run of this company."

I felt like I'd been sucker punched in the stomach. My first inclination was to leap to my feet and call him every name I could think of, except that my breath had been stolen.

"You've been distracted and distant for weeks," he continued. "Your head hasn't been in the game, and frankly, at this critical point we can't wait around for you to get your priorities straight."

Oh, the words stung my pride. I couldn't believe that he was giving me lectures about priorities. The hard truth was that I knew I wouldn't be in this situation if I hadn't let him put me here. I *had* been lax lately, leaving him alone to run the company. Distracted, like he'd said. He'd only stepped through the opening I'd unintentionally made for him, any one of them would do the same. Hell, I would have done it myself, in his shoes. Which in no way meant that he wasn't a poor excuse for sleaze with a reptile where his dick should be, but that was neither here nor there at the moment.

"We all understand you've suffered some...set-backs and while the board can appreciate your need to regroup, it can't be allowed to affect business."

I couldn't help but notice how his eyes gleamed as he passed down this verdict. I'd been a complete bitch to him over the years and he was relishing handing down my comeuppance.

"That being the case, a vote was taken to see whether or not you should be replaced."

The words were received with a jolt, but then my body ran cold as I gave him a nasty little smile. "Let me guess," I said, keeping my tone cool. "You were voted in as my successor."

He inclined his head again, but didn't trouble to hide the triumphant smirk that took over half his face.

My heart seized, but I stood on steady feet. I was beginning to feel numb inside—cold and numb. "May I offer my congratulations?"

His head shot up and for the briefest of instances, there was a look of pure panic on his face. Oh, he knew me too well to truly think I would give up without a fight, so when no fight came, he didn't know how to react.

I smiled a private smile. He wouldn't last a week. He craved the power of the position, the acclaim, but he really had no idea how much went into it.

"That's very gracious of you."

"It is, isn't it?" My tone was sweetened with enough honey to send him into diabetic shock. "I presume I still have a job?"

"I...of course, Ms. Donahue."

Ah, so now that my humiliation had been dealt, I was Ms. Donahue again. Interesting. "Am I to be your vice-president?"

He looked distinctly uncomfortable now, though he hid it well. "Ah, no, actually. We've placed you as the head of marketing for the time being."

"So thoughtful of you," I commented lightly. Good for him—if he'd put me in as his VP I'd only usurp him just as he'd done to me. He'd put a mouse he could control in the slot, if he filled it at all.

"And of course, you can continue to take as much time off as you need to get...things settled."

To deal with the staggering blow I'd been dealt, he meant. How gracious of him not to say so aloud. "Thank you." I gave him another cloying smile and turned on my heel. Before I walked away, I caught sight of my assistant. He was looking right at me, and he didn't look to be gloating. Odd, since I'd been meaner to him than anyone else. "Gentlemen," I called out to the room at large before I made my exit, head still held high. I'd perfected the art of the confident strut back in grade school—this wasn't the time to forget it.

There'd be time for that later—like when I was back at Brandon's, safe in my boyfriend's arms. Then and only then would I allow the tears that were locked behind my eyes to flow freely.